

WHAT KIND OF ENDING IS THIS?  
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Text: Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

**Y**ou don't have to be a biblical scholar to see that Mark's Easter story is a lot different than the Easter stories in the other gospels. Mark leaves out a lot of stuff that they include. There's no angel that rolls away the stone from the tomb, like there is Matthew. There's no pair of angels that appear inside the tomb, like there is in Luke. There are no linen wrappings lying on the ground, like there are in John. There's none of that.

But the most surprising thing of all that Mark leaves out is everything that comes after the Easter story. All the other gospels have what are called "post-resurrection stories"—stories about the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples and reassuring them that he's alive and well. Matthew has a story about Jesus meeting the disciples in Galilee. Luke has a story about Jesus walking along the road to Emmaus. John has a story about Jesus showing Thomas his wounds. But Mark doesn't have anything like that. We never get even a glimpse of the risen Jesus. The women run home and don't

tell anyone about the empty tomb because they're terrified. And that's it—that's the end of the gospel according to Mark.

So what kind of ending is this? It's not a very comforting one, that's for sure. In fact, people in the early church were so bothered by it that they tacked on not one but two different endings that wrap things up in a much more happily-ever-after kind of way. And honestly, I can understand why they did that. I have a hard time with Mark's original ending, too. That's why every three years, when the lectionary gives me a choice between Mark and John, I usually go with John. His Easter story is a lot more uplifting, and that makes it a lot easier to preach. He doesn't leave us hanging the way Mark does. He doesn't leave us feeling uneasy. And he doesn't leave us wondering what the women are so afraid of.

When you think about it, it doesn't make any sense. Jesus meant the world to them, and when he died, it tore their

hearts out. And now it's a few days later, and they're coming to anoint the body, and they discover that it's missing. And while they're standing there trying to figure out what happened (Was it grave robbers? Was it the Romans?) they see a young man dressed in a white robe, and he tells them, "Don't be alarmed; you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He's been raised; he's not here."

This should be the best news they've ever heard. They should be jumping for joy. Jesus isn't dead after all. They should be asking, "Where is he? When can we go see him?" But they're not. They're getting out of there as fast as they can, and they're keeping their mouths shut about everything they just witnessed. And the question is Why? Why is hearing about the resurrection so upsetting? Why is the reaction to run away and pretend like it never happened? And why does Mark leave us in such a dark and gloomy place? Why not just give us the happy ending we want, like all the other gospels?

Maybe because he has a different focus. Maybe because he's trying to tell us something, not only about Jesus being raised from the dead, but also about what it means to follow him. Maybe he wants us to think about what we're getting ourselves into when we look into the empty tomb and decide we want to be disciples.

**Y**ears ago, when I was first thinking about going to seminary, my mother, bless her heart, reached out to the pastor of the church we went to when I was a little kid and asked him if he would talk to me. I hadn't seen this man since I was eight years old, and I couldn't even remember what he looked like. But when he called me up and asked if he could take me out to dinner, I said sure, that would be great.

So we met at a restaurant, and we spent probably the first half-an-hour just catching up and getting re-acquainted. He asked me about my parents and my brother and how they were doing. I asked him about his family. Then he got to the point. He asked me about going to seminary, and I told him I was thinking about being a pastor. He asked me why, and I gave him all my reasons. Then he looked at me and said, "You come from a pretty comfortable background, and pastors don't make a lot of money. Are you sure this is what you want?" I told him I didn't need a lot of money. "And it's a really hard job," he continued. "There's a lot of stress. The hours are long. People have a lot of expectations. And it takes an emotional toll. Are you sure you're ready for that?" I told him I thought I could handle it. "Okay," he said, and then we finished eating and said goodbye. I thanked him for dinner and told him how nice it was to see him. On the inside, though, I was a little bit offended. Who's he to judge me like that? I thought. He doesn't know anything about me.

When I look back on that conversation now, though, I can see he was only trying to help me. He just wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into before I made any big decisions. And maybe that's what Mark wants, too. Maybe he wants all of us who call ourselves disciples to know what a difficult path it is. Jesus doesn't call us to go on a picnic. He calls us to follow the way of the cross—the way of self-giving and self-sacrifice. And that should make us afraid. That should make us want to run away. If it doesn't, we're either foolish, or we haven't thought it through enough.

**S**o if being a disciple and following Jesus is that difficult, why on earth would anyone want to do it? Well, I can only tell you what I've experienced.

Everything that pastor told me at dinner that night turned out to be true, and there have been times in my ministry when I wished I had paid a little more attention to him. There have been times when I felt exhausted and discouraged, times when I was giving and giving and not getting anything back, times when I wanted to quit and go do something else.

But there have also been times when I could see God at work in people's lives, times when I could feel the power of resurrection in my own life, times when I was lifted out of near despair and inexplicably delivered to a place of hope and joy. And those times have been so worth it. They've been worth every challenge, every struggle, every disappointment, every failure. They've been worth it because they gave my life meaning.

So what kind of ending is this? Well, it's an honest ending, for one thing. And it's also an ending that's actually a beginning. It's an ending that opens our hearts and our eyes to the life of faith that God is calling us to live in Christ. Amen.